

LIVING-LEARNING COMMUNITIES: THE ROLE THEY PLAY IN FIRST YEAR
RETENTION EFFORTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

Living-learning communities in higher education play a critical role in the success of our student population. Having the option of living-learning communities on campus is a sought after option for students and parents of students beginning college. For student retention efforts, it is important that our student affairs professionals understand the impact that living-learning communities have on the first-year student population. It is additionally important that professionals understand the different types of living-learning communities and determine which is best to implement on their campus. This report takes a deeper look into living-learning communities across the country and the impacts on living-learning communities have on campus.

Taking into consideration the diversity of varying living-learning communities, three specific types were examined and their success was determined based on a national study called The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (2007). This report communicates the depth and necessity of living-learning communities in higher education for students, parents, and student affairs professionals.

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my parents, Randy and Sheryl Plattner. Without their constant support through this process, I might have never succeeded. Thank you for loving me so deeply!

“The love of a family is life’s greatest blessing.” -Author Unknown

I would also like to thank my graduate committee. Dr. Christy Moran Craft, Dr. Aaron Carlstrom, and my academic advisor Dr. Doris Wright Carroll, thank you so much for your commitment to this process and ensuring my success while at K-State. I know that I would have not been successful without any of you. Dr. Carroll, you are most definitely the reason I was able to be triumphant and we did it together.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Upcraft, Barefoot, and Gardner (2005) have suggested that first year students succeed when they make progress toward developing academic and intellectual competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health and wellness, developing civic responsibility, considering the spiritual dimensions of life, and dealing with diversity (Hunter, 2006). Living-learning communities have become an important part of the college experience for the undergraduate population. Many institutions have responded in recent years by implementing the living-learning community in the hopes of attracting and retaining students in an increasingly competitive environment (Philpott, 2003). Living-learning programs are defined as programs in which undergraduate students live together in a discrete portion of a residence hall (or the entire hall) and participate in academic and/or extra-curricular programming designed especially for them (Inkelas, 2007). Most students are not required to live in those communities and can elect to do so on their own. Living-learning communities are vast and have many different styles. They are ever changing and constantly fluid depending on what the institution finds necessary for the student population they are serving. Living-learning communities can pose whatever style the institution needs. Styles can vary based on the size of the school, targeted demographic, needs of academia, and current trends with the student culture. Students are mostly looking for belonging, and living-learning communities provide the necessary tools for student affairs professionals to cultivate productive college students.

Statement of Purpose

Beginning with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, living-learning communities serve those basic essentials that each student should acquire while at college. Living-learning communities provide the tools for professionals to adequately serve each student. They do so by specifically targeting student demographics that have a specific need and catering to that group. In living-learning communities, students are placed specifically in a community so that they will be successful. This action supports retention efforts because students belong to organized groups and then become loyal to those groups.

The needs of college students are ever changing. The desire to keep up with students is becoming more important than ever in higher education. Living-learning communities have allowed student affairs specialists the opportunity to gain perspective from each learning community. Drafting specific outcomes for learning communities becomes easy when students are readily accessible while living in living-learning communities. Figuring out a way to understand the student population is extremely difficult, but through living-learning communities, student affairs professionals are able to access the student population in targeted demographics.

The purpose of this paper is to identify why living learning communities are important to the outcomes of the first-year experience. Every institution has different goals and outcomes, but the general idea is that practitioners help students succeed while in college so that they can become productive members in society. It is a goal for student affairs professionals that students are retained so that institutions can thrive. Living-learning communities lay a foundation for each first-year student so he/she can be successful at the college they chose. This report illustrates the importance of living-learning communities to first-year retention efforts at each institution.

The most basic reason for living-learning communities is so that students have the ability to connect with others. Abraham Maslow created the theory, hierarchy of needs, as a way to explain the basic human need for growth and survival (Maslow, 1970). When comparing what living-learning communities provide to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the living-learning communities seem to satisfy most of the necessary needs that a student might have. The first need is physiological. These are the basic requirements for human physical survival. They include such essentials as food, water, shelter, oxygen, and sleep. The second needs are safety needs. Once the individual's basic physical needs are met, his or her needs for safety emerge. These include needs for a sense of security and predictability in the world. The third needs are love and belonging needs. When the individual's physiological and safety needs are met, needs for love and belongingness emerge. These needs include longings for an intimate relationship with another person as well as the need to belong to a group and to feel accepted. The fourth needs are esteem needs. Esteem needs include both self-esteem and the esteem of others. Self-esteem is the feeling that one is worthwhile, competent, and independent (Krapp, 2002). The esteem of others involves the feeling that other people respect and appreciate the person. Once

the person has satisfied his or her basic needs, concerns about worthiness emerge. The focus becomes not just surviving, but also doing well according to meaningful communal standards. Finally, the last needs are self-actualization needs. These are the needs associated with realizing one's full potential. As these needs emerge, the person focuses on doing what he or she is meant to do in life developing his or her talents and abilities fully (Krapp, 2002).

Living-learning communities can grant the necessities that a student would need to survive at college. Students have the ability to sleep, eat, and breathe while they are living in those spaces. The living-learning communities provide safety for students because they are in a controlled, safe, environment. There are rules that they must follow according to the university or college's student conduct code. The third need is the idea of belonging. Living-learning communities give the students the ability to belong to a group of their peers. The most basic way to form living-learning communities is based on a common theme. Students then start their experience knowing they are in a group of similar peers. Overall, the greater a student's sense of belonging to the university, the greater his or her commitment to that institution and the more likely it is that the student will remain in college (Hoffman, 2002).

Belonging leads the way to esteem (Maslow, 1970). These students have a sense of belonging because they are involved in a purposeful community. Then they have increased confidence in their academic abilities in the classroom and their interactions with professors, peers, and family. The final need that Maslow identifies is self-actualization. It is not probable that students will reach self-actualization as undergraduates. Living-learning communities help students discover how to be a productive member of society. Students seek a skill and area of expertise in order to find a job. That is the reason for attending college. The living-learning communities allow students to specialize in a specific area and get another step closer to the goal of self-actualization.

Every student has a first-year experience, whether it is an experience designed by campus leadership or not. The term first-year experience, describes a comprehensive and intentional approach to the first college year (Hunter 2006). It is important to understand how to connect with students during their first year in order retain them throughout their college experience. Living-learning communities provide a way for students to connect in college. First year experience comprises both curricular and cocurricular initiatives. The experience is the sum of all experiences that students have in their first year at college. The first year experience is far

more than a single event, program, or course (Hunter 2006). Providing opportunities for students allows the college and student to be successful.

History of Living-learning Communities

Living-learning communities are a growing national movement. It is estimated that four or five hundred colleges and universities offer them, and the number continues to increase (Smith, 2001). Living-learning communities are now found in virtually every state, in both public and private colleges and universities, and in a diverse range of institutions (Smith, 2001). They are present in both two year and four year colleges and universities, and in research universities, comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges. It is clear that living-learning communities are a broad innovation that addresses a variety of issues, from student retention to promoting curricular coherence, from faculty and institutional revitalization to building engaging general education programs. On some campuses, the living-learning community effort is very large; on others, it is small. On most campuses, the effort is fragile, even if it has been in place for six or seven years. Although learning communities have a long history on a small scale, the movement, as a large-scale endeavor, is only about fifteen years old (Smith, 2001).

The need to improve U.S. higher education has been clearly and repeatedly articulated for more than twenty years (Purdie, 2011). One of the most frequently cited texts, *An American Imperative*, demonstrated why the American people demand that their colleges and universities improve dramatically in terms of access, retention, graduation, and the quality of education leading to a baccalaureate degree. Through the course of these desired outcomes, colleges and universities began to implement living-learning communities in order to enhance the student experience (Purdie, 2011).

The Spellings Commission continued this theme, asserting that most colleges and universities did not accept responsibility for making sure that those students they admitted actually succeeded (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), and called for improvements in six areas: (1) access, (2) cost and affordability, (3) financial aid, (4) learning, (5) transparency and accountability, and (6) innovation. In short, the case for improvements across colleges and universities has been consistent and well made (Purdie, 2011).

One area of higher education that has continued to challenge colleges and universities is the retention of first-year college students (Purdie, 2001). Living-learning communities have

helped to retain first year college students and to excel in academics. Through the process of belonging to one of these groups, students have a personal perception of the college they are attending (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The student's perception means that the student has made his/her own experience and can draw from that experience, rather than relying on other students perspectives. It allows them to want to stay and support that institution. Greater needs can be met when more is known about the students and what works for them. Pascarella and Terenzini, (2005) found that at four-year institutions, most studies reported 72 to 79 percent of first-year students persisted to the second year.

Supplemental Theory for Living-learning Communities

Learning communities utilize a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, that enroll a common cohort of students. Living-learning communities represent an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit and learning experiences to build community, and to foster more explicit connections among students, among students and their teachers, and among disciplines (MagGregor, 2002). The two most commonly used theories in studying academic performance and persistence are Astin's Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) model (1985) and Tinto's theory of voluntary student attrition (Tinto, 1975).

Astin's model posited that student outcomes, characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after college (Outcomes) were a function of the environments they experienced and the range of experiences encountered during college (Experience) and their input characteristics, demographics, student background, previous experiences (Input) (Astin, 1999). Astin's theory stated that input is the characteristics, demographics, student background, and previous experiences each student has before they come to college. Input is the knowledge the student had when they enter college. Experience was defined as the range of experiences that the student had while they attended college and finally the outcomes are the characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that existed after college (Astin, 1999). College outcomes are viewed as functions of three sets of elements.

Involvement theory explained the dynamics of how students changed or developed during college (Astin, 1999). Astin noted that to understand why students remain enrolled or earned grades that place them on academic probation, or achieve any other outcome; one must

take into account the entering characteristics of the students and what they experience during college. It is important to understand students' background (Input), in order to understand why those students are making poor choices in college (Purdie, 2011). I-E-O inputs are presumed to shape outcomes directly and indirectly with the institutional environment of every individual student. There are five basic postulates regarding involvement (1) investment of psychosocial and physical energy; (2) involvement is continuous, students invest varying energy; (3) involvement has qualitative and quantitative features; (4) development is directly proportional to quality and quantity of involvement; and (5) educational effectiveness is related to level of student involvement (Astin, 1999). Involvement theory offered students a wide variety of academic and social opportunities to become involved with new ideas (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience (Astin, 1999). Such involvement takes many forms, such as engagement in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. According to the theory, the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. From the standpoint of the educator, the most important hypothesis in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. The principal advantage of the student involvement theory over traditional methods of teaching (a classroom setting) is that it directs attention away from subject matter and technique and toward the motivation and behavior of the student (Astin, 1999). It views student time and energy as institutional resources, although there are limited resources. Thus, all institutional policies and practices, those relating to nonacademic as well as academic matters, can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement. College personnel, staff, faculty, and administrators can assess their own activities in terms of their success in encouraging students to become more involved in the college experience (Astin, 1999).

It is important to understand how negative encounters can lead students to withdraw, while positive encounters can cause students to invest in the college experience and be retained (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The first stage of the college career, separation, requires students to disengage themselves from association in past communities, most typically those

associated with the local high school and city they are from. Separation may be quite difficult or merely an accepted part of the process of development that most persons are expected to make in the course of their lives. All separations involve some form of parting from past habits and patterns of connection. The process leading to the adoption of the behaviors and norms appropriate to the college usually require some degree of transformation and perhaps rejection of those of the past communities. However close, the life of families and high schools and the demands they impose upon their students are different from those characteristics of most colleges. For virtually all students, the process of separation from the past is at least somewhat stressful and the adjustment of parting can be at least temporarily disorienting. For some, the separation may be so severe that it constrains persistence in college. This reality may be especially true for individuals who move away from their local high school communities and families to live at a distant college and/or whose colleges are markedly different in social and intellectual background from that which characterizes the family and local community. In order to become fully integrated in the communities of the college, these students have to disassociate themselves physically as well as socially from the communities of the past. Actually, their staying in college depends on their becoming leavers from their former communities (Tinto, 1988).

The second stage of the college career, transition, is a period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for associations with communities of the present (Tinto, 1988). Having begun the process of separating themselves from the past, new students have yet to acquire the norms and patterns of behavior appropriate to integration in the new communities of the college. They have not yet established the personal bonds that underlie community membership. As a result, they are bound neither strongly to the past, nor firmly tied to the future. The stress and sense of loss and confusion, if not unhappiness, that sometimes accompanies the transition to college can pose serious problems for the individual attempting to persist in college. Though most students are able to cope with the problems of adjusting to the social and intellectual life of the college, many find it measurably more difficult. Without assistance, many withdraw from the college very early in the academic year. They do so less from an inability to become integrated in the social and academic communities of the college as from an inability to withstand and cope with the stresses that such transition commonly prompt (Tinto, 1988).

After passing through the stages of separation and transition, the individual is faced with the task of becoming integrated, or incorporated into the community of the college. Having moved away from the norms and behavioral patterns of past associations, the students now face the problem of finding and adopting norms appropriate to the new college setting and establishing capable membership in the social and intellectual communities of college life. Because social interactions are the primary vehicle through which such integrative associations arise, individuals have to establish contact with other members of the institution, students and faculty alike. Failure to do so may lead to the absence of integration and to its associated sense of isolation. These in turn may lead to the student leaving the institution. However, unlike incorporation in traditional societies, students in college are not often provided with formal societal norms so they are integrated into the college culture successfully. Nor are they always clearly informed either of the character of local communities or the behaviors and norms appropriate to the college they attend. Of course, most institutions, especially residential ones, do provide a variety of formal and informal mechanisms for that purpose. Orientation programs, for instance, are becoming increasingly popular forms of introduction to the life of college. However, in most cases they are very short-lived, if not highly symbolic in character, and do not provide for the sorts of extended contact needed for the student to feel a part of the community for a long period of time. That contact may arise, however, from other kinds of programs. Fraternities, sororities, student residence associations (living-learning communities), student unions, frequent faculty and visiting scholar series, extracurricular programs, and intramural athletics may all serve to provide individuals with opportunities to establish repetitive contact with other members of the institution in circumstances that lead to the possibility of integration. Unfortunately, such programs do not always reach out to all new students; indeed, they do so infrequently. In most situations, new students are left to make their own way through the maze of institutional life. They, like the many generations before them, have to "learn the ropes" of college life largely on their own (Tinto, 1988).

Tinto's theory argues that the decision to persist or leave an institution was not a onetime decision point; rather students engaged in an on-going process of becoming more or less committed to an institution because of the degree to which they felt integrated into the academic and social systems of the institution (Purdie, 2011). Several factors influence academic and social integration, and thus student departure, including entering characteristics, goals and

commitments, institutional experiences, quality of effort and educational outcomes (Purdie, 2011). Tinto's theory of student departure is appropriate to understand the need of living-learning communities for students in transition. Not only because living-learning programs are intentionally designed to foster both academic and social integration (Inkelas & Associates, 2004; Inkelas & Wiesman, 2003), but because there are real differences in how [living-learning communities] seek to address factors relevant to academic and social integration (Purdie, 2011).

Chapter 2 - Models of Living-learning Communities

The basic ideas that underlie living-learning communities are hardly new. Their roots lie in the 1920's with the establishment of a short-lived program called the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin (Smith, 2001). Alexander Meiklejohn and noted educator John Dewey, founded the program. Alexander Meiklejohn, the author of the book and the experiment, Experimental College, is a major figure in twentieth-century American intellectual history. Born in England in 1872, Meiklejohn graduated from Brown University in 1893, took a Ph.D. in philosophy from Cornell, and returned to teach at Brown in 1897. He served as the Dean from 1901-1912. He served as the President at Amherst College from 1912 until his dismissal by its Trustees in 1923. His national reputation, won partly on the lecture circuit as an educational and social critic in the 1920's, brought him to the attention of Glen Frank, editor of *Century* magazine, who became the president of the University of Wisconsin in 1925 and brought Meiklejohn to Madison to help reform the university's undergraduate program. The result was the Experimental College, which opened its doors in the fall of 1927 and went out of existence in five years, having taught fewer than four hundred students in the four classes that enrolled in the two-year course study (Meiklejohn, 1930).

The next major chapter in living-learning communities' history takes place in the 1960's. During this period, the higher education system nearly doubled in size, and the community college system essentially established across the nation (Smith, 2001). There was a joining of the east and west coast learning community effort when Patrick Hill became provost at Evergreen in 1983 (Smith, 2001). The nation had a variety of styles of living-learning communities. The momentum for learning communities increased dramatically in 1985 with the establishment of The Washington Center for Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College under the leadership of Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean MacGregor (Smith, 2001).

The Washington Center served as a statewide and nationwide dissemination system for the idea of living-learning communities. It operated in a purposeful way to bring the many different reform efforts (writing across the curriculum, collaborative learning, and learning communities) together. It joined the learning community effort with the robust statewide diversity and assessment initiatives (Smith, 2001). The Washington Center was important in developing a language about living-learning communities along with a variety of models that

could be adapted locally. It was the first state funded inter-institutional structure to support innovation in this area, an important milestone in institutionalizing the effort (Smith, 2001).

Living-learning communities are diverse in design and purpose. Many initiatives are designed for beginning students to provide both a socially and academically engaging experience in the critical first term in college. Others provided thematic clusters of courses for specific cohorts of students, such as the underprepared, second-language speakers, returning women or community college transfers entering junior level university classes (MacGregor, 1994).

Learning communities are defined as a variety of approaches that link or cluster classes during a given term, often around an interdisciplinary theme, that enroll a common cohort of students. This represents an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences to build community, and to foster more explicit connections among students, among students and their teachers, and among disciplines (MacGregor, 2002). Effective learning communities have a number of distinctive features smaller than most other learning units on campus; have a sense of purpose; help overcome the isolation of faculty members from one another and from their students; encourage faculty members to relate to one another both as specialists and as educators; encourage continuity and integration in the curriculum; and help build a sense of group identity and cohesion (MacGregor, 2002).

Many learning community programs are designed to enhance student success, or provide a challenging, substantive context for the teaching of reading and communication skills. Others pursue these objectives while focusing on larger societal issues (MacGregor, 1994). First-year students succeed when they make progress toward developing academic and intellectual competence, establishing and maintain interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career and lifestyle, maintaining personal health and wellness, developing civic responsibility, considering the spiritual dimensions of life, and dealing with diversity (Hunter, 2006).

First-Year Experience or Freshman Seminar Courses

The First-Year Experience course (FYE course) is a two-credit, graded course typically co-instructed by two academic staff members (e.g. academic advisors, librarians) (Purdie, 2011). The course focuses on learning strategies, career and major exploration, diversity, money management, and other topics intended to help first-year students transition successfully into

college life (Purdie, 2011). Freshman seminar courses are intended to provide students with essential strategies and information to enhance the likelihood of their retention and academic and social success (Keup, 2004). In general, they can be described as an ongoing orientation program. In 1992, 69 percent of universities reported offering a freshman seminar course (Strumpf & Sharer, 1993). The organization of freshman seminar courses varies, depending largely on the nature, size, staffing, clientele, and purpose of the program at each institution (Smith & Bracklin, 1993). These courses differ in terms of requirements for participation, format, assigned academic credit, grading, instructors, and content. Given the impact of the college environment on so many facets of a new students' life, which creates almost limitless possibilities for course content, the reasons for these differences are easily understood. It has been found, however, that despite differences in course organization and concentration that "... student enrolled in freshman-year experience courses tend to complete more credit hours, earn higher cumulative grade-point averages, and return to the institutions at higher rates than students who did not enroll in such first- term courses" (Sidle & McReynolds, 1999, p. 61).

Kansas State University First-Year Seminar Program

The purpose of the KSU First-Year Seminars (FYS) program is to help students make the transition to university courses and college-level learning (Foote, 2012). In this effort, the FYS programs focus attention on the intellectual skills that students need to flourish at the university. As a place to ask questions about the university and to practice the skills needed to succeed as a first-year student, these courses provide support for the transition into K-State college life and community. The small seminars enroll only students in their first-year at K-State (Foote, 2012). Each seminar is a special FYS of a regular, academic, general education class. Although the academic content varies among the seminars, each seminar focuses on a distinctive, college-level academic subject. The most important goal of these seminars is to provide fundamental support to K-State's academic mission and its focus on student learning. FYS programs are connected to each other as parts of a larger FYS Program. All seminars are designed to introduce students to the academic standards of college-level work and the university's undergraduate student learning outcomes. The first year seminar programs emphasize critical thinking, communication, community building, and the application of learning. They also provide students with the opportunity to engage in at least three co-curricular activities.

The FYS Program has a strong, skilled, and dedicated faculty. These faculty members are part of a team of instructors who are coordinated at the university-level and work with each other to plan, design, teach, and assess the program. These instructors, come from all across campus, are pedagogically excellent, experienced, and interested in undergraduate education. They are among the best faculty at the university. With their small size and community focus, First-Year Seminars (FYS) invite and encourage an active learning environment. The seminars devote significant portions of class time to hands-on learning, group discussions, problem solving, inquiry-based learning, and activities that provide students with opportunities to develop their critical thinking and communication skills. The first year seminar programs are also academic spaces that encourage students to collaborate, interact, and develop relationships with their peers and professors (Foote, 2012).

Academic Theme Floors

Academic Theme Floors (ATF) are residence hall floors dedicated to an educational theme such as nursing or engineering, which house both first-year and continuing students (Purdie, 2011). The communities range in size from a single floor of approximately 50 students to multiple floors involving more than 300 students. Some residence halls house multiple ATFs. Each ATF is designed and lead by a group of faculty, academic support staff, residence life staff, and students. These living-learning programs do not offer courses, but rather focus on academically relevant out-of-class experiences (Purdie, 2011).

Kansas State University Cluster Floors

Cluster floors provide convenience for students to study together and facilitate specialized programming. Cluster floors are designed for a specific group of students to live together and share a commonality in the place where they live (Foote, 2012). Cluster floors are paired with a faculty member and specific programming is tailored to the students. Clusters are available to students in the following focus areas (1) agriculture, (2) architecture, (3) business administration, (4) community service, (5) engineering, (6) honors, (7) leadership, and (8) pre-health (Foote, 2012). In the agriculture cluster floor, the associate director of departmental initiatives in the Department of Housing and Dining seeks a faculty member specializing in the agriculture field (A. Plattner, personal communication, March 1, 2012). The faculty member then partners with student leaders on the cluster floor to come up with strategies for

programming efforts, cocurricular education, and ways to make the students feel more included. The agriculture cluster floor provides a way for the students to connect with faculty outside of the classroom.

Freshmen Interest Groups

Freshmen Interest Groups (FIG) are a small group of students (typically 15-25) who all live on the same residence hall floor and are enrolled together in common courses (Purdie, 2011). The goal is the creation of small effective academic learning communities in a large group setting. In three of these courses, the FIG students are in large sections of general education courses relevant to the theme of their FIG. The FIG seminar can be co-instructed by an advanced undergraduate student who serves as the student staff member on the residence hall floor on which the FIG students live and a faculty or academic affairs staff member. Each FIG is built either around an educational theme such as Women in Science or academic discipline such as nursing or communication (Purdie, 2011). First-year students are able to enroll in any combination of these three programs and all three program types are marketed to incoming students and their parents as opportunities to improve student learning and success (Purdie, 2011)

Kansas State University CAT (Connecting Across Topics) Community

Residential CAT Connecting Across Topics communities provide an opportunity for first-year students to connect with others who share their academic interests by placing them in the same campus residence hall (Foote, 2012). Twenty-two first-year students take several classes together, and they live, eat, sleep, study, and socialize with each other (Foote, 2012). In a residential CAT community, first-year students take two general education courses and one connections course with the same twenty-two students who are housed in the same residence halls. A connections course is a class that the CAT community students will take together in order to connect them in an academic setting. Students have the opportunity to work with an undergraduate residential learning assistant, who lives just down the hall and offers academic and social support. Students work with awesome faculty members, both in class and residence hall sponsored events, such as our faculty lecture series. Students participate in social and educational activities related to shared interests (Foote, 2012).

Learning communities are not basic programming in order to appease administrative convenience and use of residential communities. They are conscious intellectual structures that teachers create, and students participate in, to share a high quality and enduring educational experience. There are as many variations on the models of living-learning communities. Variations are as vast as there are institutions willing to participate. All, however, strive to provide an intense and supportive environment for intellectual growth and development (Matthews, 1994). Living-learning communities are structured in order to fit the needs of the students enrolled at each institution.

Chapter 3 - Discussion

Retention Efforts

Though it costs more to recruit new students than it does to retain current students, institutions often focus on student recruitment rather than student retention (Astin, 1993). According to Tinto (1999) most institutions do not take student retention seriously. Interventions should be tailored to each institution and then evaluated to make sure they are meeting the unique needs of the institution and its students. Retention is important for a variety of reasons. From the institution's perspective, the retention of students is necessary for financial stability and to sustain academic programs (Fike, 2008). Public policy makers are advocating accountability, and one strong measure is student retention leading to graduation or transfer. Finally, student affairs professionals want students to have a positive college experience, complete their academic goals, and enter the workforce (Fike, 2008).

The University of South Carolina-Columbia found that students who participated in their first-year seminar between 1973 and 1996 were more likely to persist into their sophomore year than students who did not participate in the seminar. The differences were statistically significant for nineteen of the twenty-three years (Goodman, 2006). While statistical significance says that it is unlikely these results would be found by chance; effect size can be a more useful indicator because it measures the magnitude of a result. Two studies at single institutions specifically matched first-year seminar participants on characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, high school achievement, and admissions test scores (Goodman, 2006). It was found that the chance of participants returning for a second year of college was 7 percentage points greater than for nonparticipants (Goodman, 2006). The retention efforts at the University of South-Carolina-Columbia are one example of how retention efforts can be supported by living-learning communities. The studies demonstrate a significance with living-learning community efforts, however it is also concluded that more research will be needed in the future.

Educational research is concerned with conditional effects. Conditional effect takes into consideration the different student and circumstances surrounding that individual. Each circumstance can prove to have a different outcome based on each student (Goodman, 2006). The weight of evidence suggests that first-year seminars have provided positive benefits to all kinds of students and those seminars are a good all-purpose intervention to increase persistence

from first to second year. Evidence has indicated that students who have benefited from participating in first-year seminars include both genders; multicultural and dominant culture students; student of various ages; students from various majors; students living on or off campus; and regularly admitted students and at-risk students (Goodman, 2006).

The research on first-year seminars has also found positive outcomes in addition to persistence and retention (Goodman, 2006). For example, several studies have concluded that students who participate in first-year seminars experience more frequent and meaningful interactions with faculty and with other students. Other investigations indicate that participants become more involved in cocurricular activities, while others show an increased level of satisfaction with college experience. Academically students who participate in first-year seminars have more positive perceptions of themselves as learners (Goodman, 2006).

Student retention has become a challenging problem for the academic community so effective measures for student retention should be implemented in order to increase the retention of qualified students at institutions of higher learning (Lau, 2003). It is essential to use data to guide institutional decisions that are supportive of retention goals. The purpose of retention data is to provide greater insight into the factors influencing student retention. Student data can be used to develop an understandable and workable plan to guide efforts toward effective interventions that increase student persistence (Fike, 2008).

Current Strategies for Living-learning Communities

Attention to the first year of college has increased significantly since the early 1980s. The release of the report *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Undergraduate Education*, a report from the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education sponsored by the National Institute of Education in 1984, focused attention on the first-year experience (Hunter, 2006). It called for increasing student involvement in higher education and it asserted that college administrators should reallocate faculty and other institutional resources toward increased service to first and second year students. Many educators interested in the first year applauded this recognition of the importance of the beginning college experience. Since then, countless students have benefited from this increased attention (Hunter, 2006).

Two research studies demonstrated the significant role played by living-learning programs in facilitating undergraduate students' transition to college. In Inkelas and Weisman's (2003) study of three types of living-learning programs, Transition, Academic Honors, and Curriculum-Based Programs, the authors found that students participating in living-learning programs enjoyed a smoother academic transition to college than their counterparts living in a traditional residence hall setting. Some of the environmental factors facilitating academic transition included discussions of academic issues with faculty and studying in groups. An academically supportive residence hall environment was important in aiding the academic transition of students in Transition Programs and Curriculum-Based Programs, while socially supportive residence halls had a positive effect on the academic transition of students in Transition Programs and Academic Honors Programs (Inkelas, 2007).

Living-learning programs have been proved helpful in facilitating the academic and the social transition of students who are the first in their families to attend college, when compared to first generation students in traditional residence hall settings (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Brown Leonard, 2007). In their academic transition to college, first-generation college students benefited especially from course-related faculty interactions and their use of co-curricular residence hall resources, such as career workshops and peer counselors. The social transition of first-generation college students was aided by an academically and socially supportive residence hall climate and their use of residence hall resources (Inkelas, 2007).

Learning Outcomes

Enjoyment of Challenging Academic Pursuits

Students participating in living-learning programs indicated greater enjoyment of challenging academic pursuits (such as the enjoyment of learning new material, or taking courses that are intellectually challenging) than their peers living in traditional residence hall settings. Among the three types of living-learning programs examined in Inkelas and Weisman's (2003) study, Transition and Academic Honors Program participants were aided in attaining this outcome by their discussions of academic issues with faculty. Academic Honors and Curriculum-Based living-learning participants benefited significantly from their discussions of social or cultural issues with peers, such as human rights, multiculturalism, and personal beliefs (Inkelas, 2007).

Intellectual Growth

While participation in a living-learning program was not significantly related to students' perceived growth in cognitive complexity, living-learning participants showed significant gains in their growth in liberal learning in comparison to traditional residence hall students (Inkelas et al., 2006). Among living-learning students, growth in cognitive complexity in some campus contexts can be positively related to use of abstract critical thinking skills in coursework and socially supportive residence hall environments (Inkelas, 2007). Interactions with diverse peers were found to be related to living-learning students' growth in liberal learning, and in some cases, to abstract critical thinking skills. Living-learning programs achieve this educational outcome by supporting and providing opportunities for co-curricular involvement directed at civic pursuits, such as community service activities (Inkelas, 2007).

Sense of Belonging

Significant differences exist in college students' sense of belonging to the college environment based on race and ethnicity. Perhaps most importantly, multicultural students exhibit a less strong sense of belonging than other students (Inkelas, 2007). Johnson et al. (2007) found that while living-learning programs did not play a role in increasing the sense of belonging of students of the racial groups included in the study, it is crucial that colleges and universities provide for a socially supportive residence hall environment in their efforts to support students' sense of belonging (Inkelas, 2007). There is not enough research to make the claim of support for multicultural students' sense of belonging in living-learning programs.

Second-hand benefits of Living-learning Programs

In some instances, the benefits of housing living-learning programs in residence halls extended beyond living-learning participants. In Longerbeam, Inkelas, and Brower's (2007) study, in arrangements where a single residence hall housed both living-learning and traditional residence environments, traditional residence hall participants perceived their residential climate as more socially supportive and were more likely to report positive diversity interactions with their peers than traditional residence hall students living in buildings with no living-learning programs (Inkelas, 2007). The proportion of living-learning programs in a residence hall building mattered. Students in halls where living-learning programs occupied over two-thirds of the

building were more likely to report socially supportive residential climates than students in halls with less than two-thirds or no living-learning occupancy (Inkelas, 2007).

Current Challenges

In a classic article, “Divided No More,” Parker Palmer argues that we can create communities of learning that reconnect teachers to their students, communities that enable us to live as whole persons with our vocation connected to our spirits (Smith, 2001). The history of learning communities is an evolving story of a movement for improving undergraduate education. It is a story about the power of personal commitments and relationship in building reform efforts. Moreover, it is a story about the power of institutional structures, processes, and value systems in shaping our institutions. Many of the early learning community innovations survived but a few years. Later efforts have been more enduring, but learning communities do not move to the next stage of development, the movement will eventually run out of steam and not reach its full potential (Smith, 2001).

Student affairs professionals know a great deal about student learning. However, they need to figure out better ways to put this into practice. Learning communities provide one of the most robust places for student learning to occur. This matter goes centrally to the issue of learning community goals, pedagogy, how institutions recruit, reward, and retain their faculty, and how they support faculty development. Faculty members are intrigued by learning community theory, but have certain anxieties about becoming involved. This anxiety is partly fear of the unknown but it is also a concern about whether faculty involvement is effective. There are also concerns about just what the learning community effort represents within the institution (Smith, 2001).

The challenge of diversity is a multifaceted issue that is partly about who participates in learning communities. Continued assessment efforts in terms of student services should continue. Since diversity is an area that is uncomfortable for many students, learning communities are an excellent venue for developing more multicultural students. There are some excellent learning communities explicitly established to support multicultural students. Living-learning communities will not necessarily attract multicultural students without a diverse faculty and a curriculum relevant to their needs (Smith, 2001).

Faculty and other campus constituents may have all but forgotten how to collaborate on common educational goals and programs. As Matthews (1997) concluded in her analysis of contemporary campus culture, the world of academe became strongly territorial, but not very social. Its three tribes- those who learn, those who profess, and those who arrange- carry a great deal of baggage, visible and invisible (Philpott, 2003). All are jealous of traditional boundaries (Matthews, 1997). With regard to the role of student affairs professionals, Love, Kuh, MacKay, and Hardy (1993) have suggested that their relations with faculty unsatisfactory quality and the frequency of student affairs' relations with faculty are due to fundamental differences in the way each views the other. On all too many campuses today, that relationship is characterized by infrequent contact, a lack of knowledge and interest on the part of each about the purposes and functions of the other, and frustration over what appears to be skewed priorities in the distribution of institutional resources. Although these two groups work at the same institutions with the same students, they sometimes act as if they were in different worlds (Philpott, 2003). It would be advantageous to also include that partnering with student affairs administrators to work with living-learning communities would prove to be useful. Student affairs administrators play a significant role in the lives of students and could potentially benefit a group of students in a cocurricular setting.

The particular role of a residential component in learning community effectiveness requires further investigation. Much of the research on learning community in recent years has focused on models adapted in institutions without residential components. In these cases, the learning community provides the most intensive opportunity for students to interact with each other in substantive ways. In a residential environment, the impact of learning community participation may be minimal as students already have a variety of ways to interact. However, Tinto et al. (1994) suggests that it might be particularly difficult for students to integrate the social and academic elements of their lives in residence halls, where the social side of college life is often pitted against the academic side. It seems useful to pursue the role learning communities can play in facilitating academic and social integration in a residential learning environment (Stassen, 2003). In addition to pursuing the relative effect of more modest learning community models and residential models, further investigation is needed on the success of the full range of learning community implementations. Some of the most positive and widely disseminated results on the impact of learning communities appear to emerge from studies that

do not necessarily include a full sample of the learning communities on the campuses studied (Stassen, 2003).

Learning communities re-emerged in the last twenty years in a period in which there has been rapid expansion of the higher education system and a climate of widespread experimentation with new approaches to teaching and learning. At the same time, the education system as a whole has come under increasing public scrutiny. This is a time of rising criticism outside the academy and a time of growing crisis within the nation's colleges and universities. At no time has it been more important to look carefully at what student affairs professionals do and be able to document its effectiveness (Smith, 2001).

Summary

Student learning and success is a campus-wide responsibility. The days of leaving students' intellectual development to the faculty and everything else to student affairs offices is long past separating the head from the heart and the rest of a student is impractical. The Association of American Colleges and Universities' Greater Expectations initiative recognizes that the whole student is an intentional learner who is empowered informed, responsible, and able to integrate learning (Hunter, 2006). The student affairs profession has a lot more work to do.

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